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## Old oil sullies **Waller Creek**

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The flooding of an underground fuel-oil tank, a long-forgotten relic from the days when Austinites used oil for their lights, set off a downtown gusher of thousands of gallons of oil and water that shut down businesses Friday and jeopardized wildlife and water quality in **Waller Creek**.

The fuel oil bubbled to the surface after a water line broke, flooding the ground beneath the Driskill Hotel and the Littlefield Office Building at Sixth Street between Congress Avenue and Brazos Street. The fuel oil, probably as much as a century old, was most likely encased in steel and concrete, said Stan Tindel, an environmental compliance specialist with the city. Oil is lighter than water, as water infiltrated the tank it would displace the oil, sending it above ground.

Austin Fire Department Battalion Chief Palmer Buck said a passerby who saw the oil coming up in an alley next to the Driskill Hotel called fire officials around 8:40 p.m. Thursday.

Even as crews worked to clean up the mess, more than a thousand gallons, by Tindel's estimation, found its way to a storm drain that empties into **Waller Creek**.

By 9 p.m. Thursday, booms were laid across **Waller Creek** to prevent oil from making its way to Lady Bird Lake and the Colorado River, and four trucks began pumping oil out. No oil got into the lake, Tindel said, but on Friday, the creek water remained black, and the area smelled of oil.

Removing the oil from the waterway could take at least until Monday, and the physical removal of oil from limestone rocks and creek banks could take at least a week, Tindel said.

"Our ultimate goal is to return the impacted area to pre-spill conditions," he said.

He said the city is conducting biological assessments of the creek.

"We have not seen any dead or distressed aquatic life," he said.

Underground tanks were once a standard method of storing oil for lighting or heating in the Austin area, Tindel said, and they remain common in the Northeast.

"We strictly regulate new storage tanks like ones in gas stations," he said.

"It's very rare you run across an old one that still has fuel in it. But ones that are 100 years or more, we just don't know about some of them. This one is a case in point."

In the latter part of the 19th century, Austin institutions such as hotels relied on a fuel-oil tank, usually 500 to 1,000 gallons in size, often filled with kerosene, to feed their lamps and furnaces, said Allen Hatheway, a retired professor of geological engineering who lives in Missouri and has written about early urban heating and power systems.

The oil would have been delivered by horse and buggy and hosed into storage tanks, which were kept underground at the behest of insurance companies.

"If a fire got going and you had an above-ground storage tank, you had real trouble," he said.

By Friday morning, crews had cleaned up 20,000 gallons of the oil-water mixture coming from the alley, said Kevin Buchman, a spokesman for the Austin Water Utility.

A faint odor of oil still hung over the neighborhood Friday.

With workers busily trying to handle the oil spill and water service to parts of the area shut off, the Littlefield building closed at noon Friday.

A stream of office workers left the building, starting the weekend a little early.

"People had been going in and out of the building all morning looking for a place to use the bathroom," said Monica Landers, a media producer who works in the building.

Some restaurants were forced to close too, including Louie's 106 on Sixth Street and the Hideout Coffee House on Congress Avenue.

The Driskill had an interruption of water for a couple of hours, beginning at 3 a.m. Friday, said hotel spokeswoman Cynthia Maddox.

The city's water utility provided an alternative connection to the main water supply for the hotel, Buchman said.

Buchman said the city does not know what led to the initial water line break.

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Assessing the damage

City officials say they plan a series of tests on water quality in **Waller Creek**. These include tests for a variety of dangerous chemicals and dissolved oxygen and pH levels for consequences for fish. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has dispatched an inspector to the scene.

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